
Volume 24
Number 2 *Lots of Ways to Be a Leader*

11-21-2018

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Recommended Citation

Lowe-Wincentsen, D. (2018). Followership, or Leading Up in Libraries in Brief. *OLA Quarterly*, 24(2), 26-28.
<https://doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1944>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Followership, or Leading Up in Libraries in Brief

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Introduction

In a recent Green Future pamphlet from Portland Gas and Electric, there is a statement above a list of businesses that choose clean wind power: “We’d like to thank the following. Or rather, the leading.” This quote sums up what this article is about. Leadership, and the capacity to lead, comes from being an effective follower and having effective followers. While many may think of sheep when they hear the word follower, that can be far from the truth.

In the 2008 text, *The Art of Followership*, Chaleff, Riggio, and Lippman-Blumen lay out five traits of effective followers: courage to assume responsibility, courage to serve, courage to challenge, courage to participate, and courage to take moral action. In his 2015 text, *Followership: What It Takes to Lead*, James Schindler lists four attributes that successful followership is built on: belief in the mission, willingness to work toward the good of the whole, loyalty, and unity of focus. Authenticity also plays a part in both leadership and followership. As a follower, being authentic can help a person be intentional and help them guide leadership with confidence (Schindler, 2015). Leaders do not have all the power (Kean and Haycock-Stuart, 2011). One needs followers to lead.

In addition to articles and books on followership, the internet also has many lists of traits of effective followers. These include integrity, active engagement, reciprocity (Bell, 2018), enthusiasm, emotional awareness (McCouston, 2018), honesty, courage, and judgment (McCallum, 2018). Here we will focus on three of the traits that can be found on many such lists. This is not an exhaustive list.

The areas of confidence, presence, and influence are areas both leaders and followers can use to shape and move an organization. Followership in general is a business-based concept. While the library business is not the business these authors write about, many of the principles transfer between worlds. The literature discussed so far is business literature, the following section will focus more on how these concepts transfer into libraries and information professions.





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Confidence

Kean and Haycock-Stuart (2011) found through interviews with nurses that following occurred when there was trust and faith in a leader. Followers who are open to leaders and have confidence in their leadership are more open to these traits.

When I was working on my MLIS at Louisiana State University, I was also employed full-time at Middleton Library. I went to my first American Library Association Annual Conference one summer and came back brimming with ideas for this project or that. One project that I brought up to my supervisor was cleaning and shifting the reference stacks. My supervisor at the time, Melanie Sims, supported the idea. Her support gave me the confidence to build a plan. My plan involved a budget for a vacuum and labor. These too were supported, and by the end of the summer the reference shelves were cleaned, and the books were cleaned and shifted.

- Confidence in yourself, your ideas, and in being able to effectively follow;
- Confidence that leadership will support you;
- Confidence in the mission and goals the team is working toward.

Presence

Presence is both in the way one carries oneself and in simply being present and discoverable. Much like the materials a library offers, if the leadership does not see or is not able to find a follower, they do not get used.

“Stick around. I might need you.” In a recent conversation with my mother-in-law, she said her father used to tell her this when she was a kid. She followed up that this later helped her as a nurse—waiting, being present, and observing to see what she could do that would be useful.

Currently, I work with a person who attends meetings of interest. This serves two purposes for her. First, she knows what is going on at the university. She is aware of current initiatives, directions, and she speaks her mind when she sees a place where she can help out. Second, because she is present and because she speaks up, other people outside the library know her and think of her and the library for certain projects.

- Presence to stay tuned to the needs of the organization, the mission, and to tie back to the greater professional world;
- Awareness of one’s self and one’s presence;
- Be present, speak your ideas and contribute.

Influence

Confidence and presence will help to build influence. Build influence to not only influence the direction of an organization, but to influence the tools available and the mode of getting to the greater strategic goals.

Conclusion for Followers

There is an ever-growing body of literature on followership. This article is not meant to be a literature review or even a comprehensive look into the topic. It is a how-to. Take away from the article some tips to help influence leaders and organizations, and to lead from the front lines even when it is not necessarily a leadership position. Be authentic to yourself and to your leaders. Be open, and have confidence that you will be and should be heard. For those who do not naturally come by these skills, cultivate them. Go into an open meeting that





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you may not normally attend and listen. If you have thoughts or ideas on the subject, share them. This will build presence. The more those ideas are adapted or supported, the more confidence will be built, and the more influence your words and actions will begin to have.

Conclusion for Leaders

Leaders can cultivate strong followers. Provide clear goals that everyone has opportunities to provide input. Allow autonomy to followers to figure out their own way of supporting the goals and the vision. This can lead to innovative and different ways of getting to the goal. Be open to followers having a different perspective, and a different method. Finally, support followers. Find out what they need to accomplish the goals and get that for them. This does come with budget and other constraints a leader may face. No one expects the moon. However, support and appreciation go a long way in accomplishing the goals and reaching toward the vision of the library.

There is much more literature available on followership than what is covered here. However, instead of a thorough literature review, readers can contemplate their own actions as followers, and those of the people with whom they have worked. What is most effective in your work, and with your leadership? If you are the leader, what can you do to support and cultivate these types of traits in those that you work with? 🐼

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